

The First Japanese Lutenists

by Hiroyuki Minamino

The first Japanese encounter with the Western world in the mid-sixteenth century was symbolic: the introduction of Christianity and the arquebus. The arrival of the Jesuit missionaries and the Portuguese merchants to Japan also prompted the steady importation of European music, including Gregorian chants, sacred and secular vocal music, and instrumental music. The missionaries realized the effectiveness of European music and musical instruments in spreading Christianity in Japan, despite the Jesuits' prohibition of the excessive use of music in the liturgy and their reluctance to utilize music as a means to attract prospective converts. For the next hundred years (until all foreign missions and most of the merchants were expelled from Japan for security reasons), the missionaries taught the converted Christians at the Christian schools to celebrate the Mass in both Latin and Japanese (often with organ accompaniment), to stage religious dramas, and to play musical instruments.¹

During his first stay in Japan (1579-1582) the Jesuit priest Alessandro Valignano embarked on a program of sending some Japanese converts to Europe so that they could experience first hand the wonders of Europe. He selected four adolescents from noble families, the so called *Tensho-Shonen Shisetsu* ("the boy emissaries of the Tensho era"): Mancio Ito, Miguel Chijiwa and Julian Nakura, all thirteen years old. As part of their preparation for their journey, these young noblemen learned Latin, Portuguese, Japanese literature and music. The accompanying Jesuits reported that they mastered the lute, harp, *viola da arco* (or rebec), organ and *cravo* (possibly a clavichord). Their performance on these instrument at several courts in Spain and Italy was chronicled with a mixture of wonder and admiration.²

Less than one year after the *Tensho-Shonen Shisetsu* returned to Japan, and their musical skill became a useful tool to save the future of Christian missions in Japan. On March 3, 1591, Valignano met the dictator of Toyotomi Hideyoshi at the Juraku-Tei, Hideyoshi's newly constructed palace in Kyoto. As the Jesuit Visitor of all Eastern Missions and a deputy Indian ambassador of Portugal, Valignano was officially carrying the state paper from the King of Portugal. His real mission, however, was to persuade Hideyoshi to reverse his decision to expel the Jesuits, which had been announced in 1587, and to revitalize the missionary activities in Japan. Valignano needed to demonstrate the political and economic strength of Europe and the spiritual power of Christianity. He planned to introduce European culture through the *Tensho-Shonen Shisetsu*, who of course had been educated in the various

European disciplines. They were especially versed in music, and it was in this capacity that Valignano wanted to impress Hideyoshi. The youths performed a song, accompanying themselves on a lute, harp, rebec, and "un grave cimballo" (keyboard). When the musicians stopped in the middle of the song (fearing the dictator had been disinterested), Hideyoshi commanded them to continue and repeat the song three more times. A Jesuit translator, Luis Frois, reported that they sang and played elegantly and produced harmonious sound. After the performance, Hideyoshi took in his own hands each instrument and asked about their playing techniques. The dictator was proud of the Japanese youths' mastering foreign instruments which were so different from the native ones. He was also proud of the the boys' skill, and even hinted at employing them in his service.

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Several paintings by Japanese artists, in imitation of the European style from around 1600, depict several types of European musical instruments, such as viols, lutes, and *violas de mano* (vihuelas).³ Most of them appear in the "Byobu-e," the painting on large folded screens. The subject was usually pastoral, depicting European scenery and everyday life in panoramic views. There survive six paintings that depict the lute. The inaccuracies and discrepancies found in the Japanese paintings (such as the shape and angle of the peg-box and the manner in which the pegs are inserted) suggest to us that the Japanese painters had no actual encounter with or limited knowledge of the structures and performance practices of the instruments they depicted.

Valignano well knew that Hideyoshi was not the only non-Christian warlord who would have been fascinated by European music and musical instruments. Their attractiveness had been tested as early as 1551 when Francis Xavier, the first Jesuit missionary in Japan, presented a keyboard instrument to a local warlord in exchange for permission to minister in his feudal territory. The vogue for European culture, however, waned in the early seventeenth century, when all foreign missionaries were expelled and the Japanese converts were persecuted. As the "Christian Century" ended, so did the first cultivation of the lute in Japan.

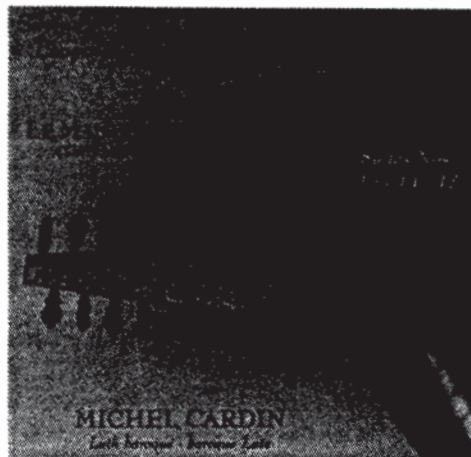
Notes:

- ¹For the Jesuit missions in Japan, see C. R. Boxer, *The Christian Century in Japan, 1549-1650* (London, 1951). For the early cultivation of Western music in Japan, see Arimichi Ebisawa, *Yogaku Denrai-Shi* (Tokyo, 1983).
- ²For their European trip, see Eta Harich Schneider, "Renaissance Europe Through Japanese Eyes," *Early Music* 1 (1973): 19-25, and Judith C. Brown, "Courtiers and Christians: The First Japanese Emissaries to Europe," *Renaissance Quarterly* 47 (1994): 872-906.
- ³Reproduced and discussed in Sumio Omata, "Plucked Instruments in the Iconographical Sources in the 16th Century Japan," *Gendai Guitar* 124 (1977): 40-45. For the European influence in Japanese painting, see Mitsuru Sakamoto, "Shyoki Yofu-Ga" in *Nihon-no-Bijutsu* 80 (1973): entire volume. I am preparing a study on European musical instruments depicted in 16th-century Japanese paintings.



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